

Introduction

To teachers of languages other than English

I happen to be a teacher of English and so this book is aimed initially at teachers of English and works on English structures.

The exercises and games could act as adequate frames for the teaching of any grammar under the sun. If you want to use the games in this book for teaching *your* language you will find them extremely easy to adapt. Good luck!

What's in the book?

Section I presents traditional games like 'Noughts and crosses', 'Snap', 'Monopoly' and 'Snakes and ladders', modified to allow students to work in small groups and show themselves and you how much or how little grammar they know. Less traditional game frames in this section include 'Auction', 'Double or quits' and 'The money game'.

I use the word 'game frame' because, though each game in this section is offered as working on a particular grammar area you can fill each frame with whatever grammar content you want. The particular grammar content proposed in the section is only there by way of exemplification.

This section has the students working cognitively on grammar: they are asked to think consciously about what is correct and what is incorrect.

Section II is a collection of Silent Way, or Silent Way inspired exercises in which students build sentences and paragraphs in warm cooperation with each other rather than in competition. Your role is to give silent feedback to individuals and to the class, but only when absolutely necessary. II.14, 'With your back to the class', has you sitting with your back to the class giving them four signals, two with your head and two with your hands! Work from this section will allow you to enjoy being productively quiet in the group, while observing the students in full activity.

The average teacher in Europe today notches up a score of about 60–70% teacher-talking time in his or her classes. Just 35% or less is left to the students! The exercises in Section II could bring your teacher-talking time down to less than 5% of the overall exercise time.

Section III moves right away from cognitive work on grammar. In these exercises the students are asked to write and say things about themselves and people who are significant to them within a set of structures prescribed by

the teacher. The students' focus is on *what* they are saying not on the form they are using. *They* control the content, *you* control the structures.

These exercises have the students practise given grammar points while thinking and feeling about human relationships. If you find this work relevant to the way you teach you will find more activities of this sort in *Grammar in action*, C. Frank and M. Rinvoluceri (Pergamon, 1983).

Section IV, Grammar through drama, has the students off their chairs practising grammar through movement, shouting, and writing on each others' backs. Excellent for jaded classes or for groups with lots of unspent energy that needs to be channelled.

Section V is a ragbag of useful grammar-practising activities which I find it hard to classify properly.

Level?

Each exercise is proposed for a given level ranging from beginner to advanced. This refers simply to the grammar content of that particular activity. By changing the grammar content you can, in many cases, use the game or exercise frame offered at a higher or lower level. If you look at I.6 you will see that the level stated is intermediate and the grammar worked on present perfect + for/since. The game proposed in I.6 is 'Snakes and ladders'. By putting appropriate sentences of your own choice on the boards the students play on, you could use the game at post-beginner or advanced level.

Choice of structures

If you glance through the table of contents you will notice that a great many of the exercises work on the present simple and past simple. In most course books these two tenses are given the same amount of space as less used tenses like the past perfect, past continuous and present continuous. In some textbooks more time and effort is budgeted for the present continuous than for the present simple, despite the fact that the latter is used about eight times more frequently in English than the former.

I decided to give more exercise space to the most frequent tenses in the English verb system.

If you think I am wrong, all you have to do is delete these two tenses from the exercises they occur in and fill the frames with the structures you want to work on with your students.

Where do these games fit into a teaching programme?

Hard to answer because I don't know how you teach. In my own teaching I have used this sort of game in three ways:

- a) diagnostically *before* presenting a given structure area to find out how much knowledge of the area is already disjointedly present in the group;
- b) after a grammar presentation to see how much the group have grasped;
- c) as revision of a grammar area.

I do not use grammar games as a Friday afternoon 'reward' activity – I use them as a central part of the students' learning process.

Grammar is serious!

Grammar is perhaps so serious and central in learning another language that all ways should be searched for which will focus student energy on the task of mastering and internalising it. One way of focusing this energy is through the release offered by games.

Teenagers are delighted to be asked to do something that feels like an out-of-class activity and in which they control what is going on in the classroom – they become subjects, while for a lot of the 15,000 hours they spend in school between 6 and 16 they are the *objects* of teaching. The Belgian businessman who came out to coffee after a grammar game saying 'Ce n'est pas bête du tout', was expressing his surprise that a game could be fun and serious at the same time. The point is that the fun generates energy for the achievement of the serious goal.

Can I let my students see wrong sentences?

In Sections I and II students have to decide, in the course of a game, if a sentence is grammatically correct or incorrect. This means that they are presented with quite a number of incorrect sentences.

Some teachers feel this is pedagogically bad – the argument goes that students will imprint the wrong sentences they see. I would suggest that this does not in fact happen in grammar games because the students are wary of each sentence they see and make very conscious judgements about which are correct and which incorrect. You don't willy-nilly imprint what you are highly wary of. There is more to the human mind learning a foreign language than Skinner conditioning his pigeons' responses.

Do these games require a lot of preparation?

For the games in Section I you have to master the rules and do a certain amount of copying of material. Once you have done the physical preparation you can re-use a game without further work in subsequent classes.

If you want to use the game frames I have suggested for structure work of your own choice, you will have more work to do, but if you decide to do this you will be the sort of person who likes this kind of extra work!

The games in Section II mostly require no physical preparation at all but you may find trying to be silent in class an experience you need to prepare yourself for internally.

Section III activities will take up almost none of your out-of-class time and will afford you a view of your students that you are unlikely to get through most traditional exercises. You will have a chance to observe the students discovering more about each other as people but *through* the target language.

The only preparation you need for Section IV, apart from making a few cards for one of the activities, is to warn the colleagues teaching either side of your classroom that they may hear a bit of noise during the period. Here I am making the serious point that, as language teachers, we have as much right to get our classes producing a volume of sound as do music teachers. There would be a strong case for sound-proofing our classrooms so that our work does not disturb that of other colleagues. How can we teach language in decorous silence?

To use Section V you simply need to do a spot of copying.

Four advantages of *Grammar Games*

- 1 The students have to take individual responsibility for what they think the grammar is about.
- 2 The teacher is free to find out what the students actually know, without being the focus of their attention.
- 3 Serious work is taking place in the context of a game. The dice-throwing and arguing lightens and enlivens the classroom atmosphere in a way that most people do not associate with the grammar part of a course. The 'game' locomotive pulls the grammar train along.
- 4 Everybody is working at once – the 15–30 minutes the average game lasts is a period of intense involvement.

Feelings about grammar

Meeting and interiorising the grammar of a foreign language is not simply an intelligent, cognitive act. It is a highly affective one too. Little work seems to have been done by psychologists or linguists on learner feelings towards specific ligaments of the target grammar and the change in these feelings as the learner moves from one level of language command to the next.

I am only at the beginning of the exploration of this field but I have found it helps to make students more conscious of what is going on inside them if you ask them to introspect from time to time during a course as to which structures they like in the target language and which they dislike, and why.

I simply ask students to write down three grammar structures and three exponent sentences they like and three they don't. Students then come to the board and put their sentences up under two headings:

NICE

UGH

They then explain why their sentences are 'nice' or 'ugh'.

Examples

A native speaker of French who had reached intermediate level in Spanish said she really liked the *ando* verb endings in Spanish, as in 'estaba caminando', because they gave a strong feeling of the progressive, of on-goingness, of continuation.

The same person said she strongly disliked Spanish first person singular preterite endings, as in 'recibí'; they seemed ridiculous to her and she regularly got them wrong.

A native speaker of German who had reached near native competence in English said many German speakers reject:

What does he look like?

not only because in German you say 'Wie (*How*) sieht er aus?', but also because as children learning their own language they were taught that 'Was' (*What*) is rude and should not be used.

A native speaker of Italian learning English at post-beginner level strongly objected to the construction:

How old are you?

He found it particularly ridiculous that English speakers even say this to a very young baby.

A post-beginner Portuguese speaker was unhappy about the mutual irregularity of:

drINK – drANK

thINK – thOUGHT

She felt it should either be: **dRINK – dROUGHT**
(rhyming with ought)
or: **tHINK – tHANK**

This chimes with 5 year-old native speakers of English who often give *brang* as the past of *bring*.

An Italian post-beginner learner of English reported that these sentences used to annoy him a lot.

You'll remember to close the door, won't you?

Yes, I will.

He said he used to dislike the auxiliary verbs being made to carry the meaning of the main verb. This was his feeling a month previously. He said he now found the English way of using auxiliary verbs in place of the main verb elegant and acceptable. You couldn't do this in Italian.

This student's evidence suggests an evolution of feeling towards the target language structures. Was all his emotion centred on grammar structure? He told us the sentence about closing the door was said to him by his landlady. Maybe the month had given him time to adjust to her as a person, and thus to her utterances, and thus to their form? What I am suggesting is that the socio-linguistic aspect of attitudes to grammar structures can't be ignored.

A native speaker of German with a post-beginner's grasp of English disliked:

What's your mother like?

because the answer to the question should be *my mother likes chocolates*.

A French speaker at post-beginner level in English disliked:

This is the book you're looking for.

because he felt the omission of *that* is barbaric. The omission made the sentence almost meaningless to him.

A Brazilian disliked the expression:

I'm sorry.

because it is routine, falsely polite, insincere.

A post-beginner Italian loved:

Lovely day, isn't it?

because of the music and spring of the intonation.

A post-beginner French learner liked:

I'm going to take my dictionary.

because it was really clear, as in French.

A German speaking post-beginner learner from Switzerland very much liked:

What was it like?

as she found it neat and rounded.

An intermediate learner from Italy liked:

Official notices

because adjective-noun order in English is different from Italian and, he found, much better.

An intermediate German speaker liked:

I wrote a letter with a beautiful pen.

He gave instant comprehension as his reason for liking the sentence – he said that when there is a *did* in the sentence he had to think before he could extract the meaning.

An intermediate Italian learner was unhappy with:

-Does she need anything?

because she always leaves out the *es*.

A German intermediate speaker of English liked:

Do you like England?

Yes, I do.

because in German the answer would simply be *Yes*. She felt the English way is stronger and more definite.

Another German intermediate student liked:

I didn't get it.

because in German you would have to say *understand it* – she felt *get* was quicker, more direct, less pompous.

A lower-intermediate Spanish student disliked:

I wonder if you would mind opening the door?

In her own words: 'I don't like this sentence because I think it is not very usual and when I had tried (*sic*) to use it I never can because I think I will be ridiculous.'

A post-beginner Turk disliked sentences with **must/mustn't**. As far as I could gather he disliked the concept of obligation.

Whom does it belong to? sounded bad to a post-beginner German learner who strongly wanted to transfer the *to* to the front of the sentence.

To most students it comes as a new dimension that they have, and that others round them have feelings about constructions in the target language. It helps them to realise that the process of learning a new language besides

being cognitive is deeply affecting. It makes the learning process a good deal more interesting.

If you run grammar-feelings-sharing sessions at intervals through a course students are able to see how their feelings change as they move through different stages in their command of the language. II.19 and II.20 are exercises that may help in this context.

Application of these ideas to lexis teaching

See *Learning English words*, J. Morgan and M. Rinvolucri (Oxford University Press, 1986).